

By Colleen Long

NEW YORK —

With the economy slumping and fuel prices soaring, facials and massages may not be a top priority for consumers on a budget.

But America's top spas, gathered in New York for the annual meeting of the International Spa Association, are trying to make it as easy as possible for visitors to indulge without using up their gas money or breaking into the piggy bank.



The Ojai Valley Inn & Spa offers reasonably priced specials.

"You can still go and have a spa experience without spending a ton of money," said Veronica Cole of the Ojai Valley Inn & Spa in Ojai, Calif. "Many spas, like ours, offer use of our facilities with one treatment, so you can come spend hours relaxing."

In other words, if you can't afford a weekend or overnight stay, consider booking one massage or scrub at a destination spa, which usually entitles you to use the pool, steam room and other facilities for the day.

The Ojai Valley Inn, located not far from Los Angeles, is a destination spa known for its blooming lavender gardens and an approach that draws on Native American traditions. Cole said carving out an hour or two and hanging out at the spa can be relaxing enough to make you feel like you're on a mini-vacation.

Jaime Huffman of the Grove Park Inn Resort & Spa in Asheville, N.C., said

more 50-minute massages have been made available recently instead of more expensive 80-minute massages. The Cliff House Resort & Spa in Ogunquit, Maine, offers a \$99 spa sampler on Sundays.

Booking midweek is usually cheaper than weekend trips, and spa owners suggest asking about specials like a mother-daughter discount or a family discount. Most spas have them but don't necessarily talk them up.

Cole also suggested asking the therapist or aesthetician for tips on how to continue the regimen at home.

"It's not that we don't want you to come and stay with us for days — we do," she said. "But if it's a choice between thinking it's too expensive and skipping it altogether, we'd rather you just come for something small."

Spas are still growing despite the economy: 138 million people visited spas around the country in 2007, according to the most recent industry figures from the International Spa Association. And spa revenue in 2007 was \$10 billion, the organization said, up from just over \$9 billion the year before. Data for 2008 shows that spas continue to grow, the association said.

Spa operators also suggest considering a spa vacation as an alternative to going to Europe or taking some other big trip. There's rarely a need to drive once you're at a destination spa, so you won't be spending money on gas. And an all-inclusive booking means that lodging, food, pools, the locker room and other amenities and facilities like hot tubs and steam rooms are included in the cost.

"You can really retreat to a spa, and there are no unaccounted costs because you pay upfront," said Lola Roeh, general manager of the Osthoff Resort, which is home to the Aspira Spa in Elkhart Lake, Wis. "You can choose to add on costs, like additional treatments, but that's up to you."

Destination spas can be pricey — \$500 for a weekend or more — but it's possible to cut other costs if you decide

to vacation at one. The Lodge at Woodloch, located about two hours outside of New York in Hawley, Pa., is far enough away from the city that visitors can feel like they're on a real vacation, but close enough to take a bus or train from Manhattan and save on gas. And you don't have to stay a week or five days — many spas offer two-night stays that can still be relaxing.

Many other spas are located outside of major metropolitan areas, like Kohler's newest day spa in Burr Ridge, Ill., outside Chicago. The company, known for its faucets, paired a showroom with the spa so clients can sit in whirlpools or fancy tubs and do shopping for remodeling, too.

Along with tips for spa-goers on a budget, other themes emerged during the spa meeting. Here are five trends shaping today's spa experience:

• **Busy bees:** Many spas are catering to the stresses on busy workers. The Spa of Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Va., is offering a WiFi massage geared toward the muscles you use when you're at the computer. Mohonk Mountain



Mohonk Mountain House uses organic products made from locally grown ingredients.

House in New Paltz, N.Y., offers meditation to help calm nerves.

• **The first time:** Ginn Hammock Beach Resort in Palm Coast, Fla., offers a clothed massage — for people who are afraid of going in the buff to a treatment. A survey of spa-goers last year found 70 percent who hadn't tried a massage were uncomfortable with being naked or partially naked. This message eases people into the treatment — and hopefully allows them to feel more comfortable to go full Monty later on.

• **Couples too:** Ginny Lopis of The Lodge at Woodloch said she's seeing more and more couples booking spa getaways. At least half the guests these days are male, she said. "It's really not just for ladies anymore," she said. "We get husbands and boyfriends here who really enjoy it." Other spas say they are seeing more couples, also.

• **Go green:** Spas are getting greener, from homeopathic treatments at the JW Marriott Spa Collection to an eco-friendly spa at Mohonk Mountain House that uses organic products made from locally grown ingredients. The Kohler spas are big on water conservation, and use eco-friendly shower heads and toilets.

• **Distinguish from the masses:** With more than 18,000 spas around the country, establishments are distinguishing themselves by offering unique treatments and products. The Four Seasons Hotels & Resorts spas offer a lava shell neck treatment, which uses shells, applied in the same way that heated stones are sometimes used in massage. The Lake Austin Spa Resort located outside Austin, Texas, offers yoga and spa treatments for those with asthma and allergies. — AP